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ABSTRACT

Jamaican Creole-speaking college students find it difficult to switch to standard English for school-related tasks. At the composition level, many Jamaican students still experience problems with higher order concerns such as a organization, unity, and coherence. With regard to lower order concerns, three types of writing miscues are prevalent: (1) those linked to the influence of the oral Creole language, (2) those reflecting incomplete mastery of the language of education, and (3) those revealing unfamiliarity with the print code. Even after Jamaican students have mastered the linguistic, alphabetic, and spelling systems of the educational code, cultural patterns are still in constant conflict with those required in academic situations. Creole-speaking students should be taught to code-switch rather than to try to eliminate their native Creole, to conceptualize in their own language before doing so in English. Teachers should provide practical contexts for students to develop proper organizational skills, and extensive exposure to various types of reading materials. Finally, more classroom time should be allotted for writing practice in a workshop atmosphere--writing, revision, editing, and teacher/student conferences should be regular features of the program. (HTH)

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LITERACY IN A CREOLE CONTEXT: TEACHING FRESHMAN ENGLISH IN JAMAICA

Mertel E. Thompson

It is difficult, if not impossible to provide an all encompassing definition of literacy. In some settings and at some historical periods, the ability to sign one's name would pass for literacy. In others a high standard of reading and writing skills is necessary if one is to function successfully even at the most basic level in society. Bizzel (1983)[2] refers to the existence of multiple literacies, one of which is academic literacy. She restates the claim that literacy is a cognitive tool which fosters and develops a particular way of thinking. At the same time, literacy can be viewed as social practice: people use literacy for specific purposes in society. To borrow Joseph Williams'[19] term used in relation to language -- literacy is use-governed. McDermott (1977)[11] and Shuy (1969)[16] have also raised the point that "people in different communities handle literacy in different ways and that "certain ways of speaking in certain situations are related to "just what kind of literacy is achieved by certain people". This is particularly true in contexts where the language of education is not the same as that spoken by the learner, for each language has its own distinctive ethos, values and assumptions.

In this paper, literacy will be related to specific patterns of thought, organization and expression which enable students to function successfully at the college level. Although the term literacy embraces both reading and writing, the main concern here is with writing. First. the nature of writing at the college level will be explored. Then I will briefly outline the problems which constantly recur in the work of Jamaican Freshman English students -- those which they share with students of writing

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in general and those which appear to be related to the Jamaican creole setting. The implications for teaching and research will then be examined and possible ways of remediation suggested.

At this point, a few comments on the Jamaican creole, the mother tongue of Jamaican students, will set a fruitful context for discussion. The creole developed out of the contact between English masters and African slaves during the period of slavery. Its lexicon is mainly English-based with certain elements deriving from African tribal languages. The grammar deviates markedly from Standard English especially in the way tenses, plurals, possessives and negatives are expressed. In these and other areas the creole sticks more closely to its African antecedents. The most important differences have been presented in Handout No. 1.

The creole is a fully developed linguistic system which adequately fulfills the needs of its speakers but its influence on the acquisition and use of Standard English literacy has been construed as somewhat negative. Many students even at the higher levels of education, find it difficult to switch from the creole system to that of Standard English when faced with school-related tasks. So there has been a continuing debate on the effect of the creole on the various levels of Jamaican education -- elementary through college. As in the standard foreign language situation, the creole interferes and even inhibits certain patterns of thinking and expression which are highly valued in formal education. So the Jamaican student has to deal with some special constraints in addition to the general ones common to all Freshman English students at the college level. Though American students, for example, share certain individual problems with Jamaican students they do not share the range of problems experienced. And for the creole-speaking students the problems are more intense.

To set our parameters, we need to determine what it means to write at the college level. Susan Miller (1983)[12] in answering this question articulates the socio-historical, cultural and textual constraints which govern a writer in the process of writing. She explains that at the most basic or the most sophisticated level:

> writing transforms or adds to the consciousness of those who write, as they may not speak, always as aware participants in a separate mode. It depends on both the broad cultural setting and the textual setting in which it occurs.... Its technological, formal, schooled origins have created a series of manifestations that make it less able to escape the artifact or genre of history. (227)

Miller further states that literacy is both functional and textual. On one level, it is a cultural tool or skill which enables the possessor to fulfil a social role. On the other, it confers "the ability to act within the world of texts."

However, the boundaries imposed on writers do not circumscribe but rather liberate them to move beyond, elaborate and interpret culture and situation. In these terms, writing can be viewed as a fairly complex, challenging exercise which demands a reasonably high degree of cognitive, linguistic, metalinguistic and rhetorical competences. Ideally the student should possess:

- the ability to manipulate the linguistic resources of the language of education and the conventions of writing (creative and academic) for the purpose of effective communication.

- the ability to generate, select, order and present ideas in a logical, coherent, lucid and interesting manner to a selected audience for specific purposes.

- the ability to vary subject matter and style in accordance with audience and rhetorical context.

- the ability to read one's own writing critically (or that of others, as the case demands), to sense imbalances or inconsistencies, and to select from the available options those which best suit the purpose in hand.

All of these guidelines presuppose certain patterns of thought and ways of categorizing and expressing experience.

How does the Jamaican college student measure up to the standards suggested by these guidelines? In a paper of this length, it is impossible to present a complete picture so I will attempt a profile. The comments will not apply to all Jamaican Freshman English students, for as in other educational contexts, there are the excellent, the average and the weak students. However, certain problems are widespread and occur frequently enough to cause concern.

At the Freshman English level, many Jamaican students still experience problems with Higher Order Concerns such as organization, unity and coherence. They find it difficult to set goals and to translate global concerns into specifics in accordance with these goals. Often they do not perceive important relationships central to the topic at hand. They fail to build up a coherent, lucid picture of their over-all topic. Introductions tend to be shallow, not really setting directions or giving cues to the purpose of the paper. As a result, the body of their papers are usually disconnected, lacking smooth transitions from one idea to the next. Paragraphs reveal no organizational logic. The reader gets the impression that ideas are tacked on as they occur to the writer, giving little evidence of a deliberate plan.

The reader is often left to find the way through a maze of information, to read, select and arrange ideas which might be considered relevant. This is somewhat reminiscent of Linda Flower's[6] concept of a "complete printout" obtained from a memory search. The problem is that the writer deletes the selection and arrangement stages and presents the information "as is." In the Jamaican situation, this is further compounded by the lack of elaboration and illustration. General statements are often left unsupported and unsubstantiated. Conclusions are usually weak or nonexistent. There is little evidence that the student has charted a course and followed it through to a point of closure. The reader most often discerns a lack of control. The writer does not seem to have examined all the available options in terms of ideas, word choice and presentation strategies, and then made a deliberate selection.

To sum up, at the level of Higher Order Concerns many Jamaican Freshman English students tend to use a narrative-type framework in preference to an analytical hierarchical type. They exhibit a lack of organizational skill, pay scant attention to details and in general display very little control over their material.

When we turn our attention to Lower Order Concerns, we discover that certain types of writing miscues are overwhelmingly present, even cropping up in the work of better students. I have grouped these miscues into three categories--

- those which can be linked to the influence of the oral creole language.

- those which reflect incomplete mastery of the language of education and --

- those which reveal "unfamiliarity with the print code" (Hartwell, 1980)[8]

The groups are not mutually exclusive as some overlapping does occur, but they are useful for the purpose of discussion.

In the creole-related group are the following:

- the absence of the possessive marker
- the use of present tense in past tense contexts.
- problems of subject-verb agreement
- absence of the copula or linking verb
- problems with the use of subject/object pronouns
- confusion of the terms "much" and "many" as they apply to mass and count nouns.

Handout No. 2 contains a sample of such miscues extracted from students' work. I am quite aware that these types of miscues occur in the work of students in other educational contexts -- white students as well as black students. But as Labov (1972)[10] and Sternglass (1974)[16] explain, the degree of frequency is the significant factor. Significant also, is the occurrence of the "deviant" patterns in the creole language system which is the main mode of communication. So there is a kind of dilemma: what is perfectly acceptable in one context is aberrant in the other. Good students are able to monitor their output (to borrow a term from Krashen 1981)[9] but average and weak students experience difficulty switching from an informal creole context to a formal Standard English one. The language barrier engages so much of their attention that it inhibits progress both at the level of thought and surface correctness.

The problems related to incomplete mastery of Standard English are largely manifested as hypercorrections or overgeneralizations.

Turning to Handout 2, sentence No.5 "The Rastafarian has try to patternized the principle but has misinterpret the scripture", "try" which should have taken the -ed past is in the present tense while the infinitive form "to patternized" (itself a coinage) is rendered in the past tense. Further, the presence of "misinterpret" in the present tense in the same sentence reveals that the writer is not in control of the tense rule. The student is aware that Standard English requires the use of a past tense marker but is not quite sure when to use it. So the result is hypercorrection. One of my better students recently wrote the word "seeked" in place of "sought." This is similar to the type of overgeneralization occurring in the speech of a child acquiring its first language. In truth, this type of miscue is developmental. What is important is that the form be eventually replaced by the correct form. In the case of the student, the receptive competence of Standard English may be fully in place but production lags behind. The same principle applies when a student writes "This was due to <u>they</u> asking questions. I get the idea of <u>they</u> wanting to use us as guinea pigs". The pronouns "they" and "their" are not used in creole. "Them" is used in both subject, object and possessive positions. Though this student will use the correct form sometimes he/she still experiences confusion. But the same student would never say "Him a walked" or "They a come" in creole.

The problems associated with unfamiliarity with the print code include improper punctuation and insensitivity to sentence boundaries. These result in incomplete sentences, run on sentences and sentences or unrelated ideas often a paragraph long. During the year I taught American college students, their work was often characterized by short, choppy sentences which indicated the need for sentence combining exercises. On the contrary, Jamaican students tend to write long

sentences which often end in confusion. One reason for this could be the dependence on coordination in the spoken creole. The written work tends to be "written down speech."[12] Harking back to Miller (1983), in the act of writing these students need to function as "aware participants in a separate mode." They lack the kinds of metacognitive and meta-linguistic skills which are needed for writing at the college level.

The cognitive aspects of literacy have been closely linked with the solving of "verbal reasoning problems in a way appropriate to school contexts"[71] (Hartwell, 1983). Where the cognitive patterns demanded by the school are valued and practiced in the culture, literacy is facilitated. Where the converse exists, the mismatch creates problems for the acquisition and use of literacy. The profile of Jamaican students indicates that even after students have acquired a fair mastery of the linguistic, alphabetic and spelling systems of the educational code, they might still experience difficulty. This is because the patterns ingrained by their cultural background are in constant conflict with those required in academic situations.

Scribner and Cole (1974)[13] explain that there is no mental or cognitive deficiency involved. The students are merely unpracticed in the desired modes of thought. This will affect their verbal patterns, categorization preferences and response to school-oriented tasks. Dillon and Schmeck (1983)[4] present evidence to show that although there are individual differences in cognitive styles, cultures do tend to reinforce one style or another. Flavell (1979)[5] asserts, however, that the individual can be taught to monitor, assess and evaluate his/her cognitive style and to know and select problem solving strategies or heuristics consistent with the specific task.

Researchers have identified two main cognitive styles -- the holistic/global, and the analytic/articulate. The holistic/global style is associated with field dependence, concrete, imagistic, intuitive thinking and expression as well as difficulty in handling hierarchical and statistically based concepts. The analytic/articulate style is associated with field independence, the ability to abstract, hypothesize and hold judgement in abeyance while evidence is being evaluated. This is the style which is highly valued and rewarded in educational circles. The styles should not be viewed as superior or inferior -- the point at issue is appropriateness in a particular situation.

Cooper (1980)[3] and Shade (1981)[15] have associated Afro-American learning preferences and modes of expression with the holistic/global style. Both note a positive correlation between holistic style and oral based, imagistic forms of language such as Negro nonstandard dialects. Berry (1971)[7], Witkin (1967)[20] and Scribner and Cole (1974, 1981)[13 14] point out that race is not cognitively significant but cultural conditioning, family and socialization patterns are important factors. Where children are given the opportunity to develop independence in their family situation and with specific relation to their mother, they tended to become more analytic thinkers. The presence of the oral based, imagistic creole language and the prevalence of mother and grandmother dominated families in Jamaica, could tempt a researcher to draw tentative conclusions. But in the absence of formal studies of creole cognitive styles one must proceed with caution. However, based on personal observation of the writing of Jamaican students at the various levels of education over the last nineteen years, it is safe to say that significant numbers of creole-speaking students do display the classic features of holistic thinking.

So far the demands of literacy at the college level have been outlined. The problems of Jamaican creole-speaking students and the special linguistic and cognitive constraints under which they operate have been examined. It is now necessary to consider the implications for teaching.

As in the United States where the status of non-standard dialects and "students' right to their own language" are touchy issues, so in Jamaica, solutions or strategies which demand recognition and use of the creole are extremely sensitive issues. However, truly corrective measures need to be taken long before the creole-speaking student reaches the college level and these do involve a positive attitude toward the creole. In my doctoral dissertation which called for sociolinguistic-centered in-service education of Jamaican Language Arts teachers, I stressed the points that teachers need to be aware of:

(a) The patterns of language use in the community, their divergence from or convergence with the patterns which school-related activities demand;

(b) the communicative and cognitive styles of creole speakers (and the ways these contrast with those desired in education)

(c) the function of language in self identification and definition and the resultant effect on achievement.[18]

It is important that creole-speaking students be taught to code-switch rather than to try to eliminate their native creole. The teaching philosophy should be "additive" rather than "replacive." Students should be taught to conceptualize in their own language before being asked to do so in a language which is not theirs. Then when they are comfortable with the concepts, transferring their thoughts into the correct code

might be less of a problem-- if there is adequate practice in the use of that code. The fact that most Jamaican teachers, elementary through college levels, are themselves bidialectal puts this type of approach quite within the realm of possibility.

At all levels of the system, more time should be allotted to the differential areas. For example, teachers should spend more time on the explanation of concepts since the desired level of abstraction might not come naturally to the students. In teaching classification skills, for example, teachers should draw on important patterns in the native culture and use these as a base for moving out into other ways of categorization. In a recent TV programme (imported from the U.S.) this was illustrated. The activities of rival gangs and their control of well-defined territory were successfully used to teach a potential high school dropout about the atom and it constituent parts.

Since students lack proper organizational skills, teachers should provide meaningful contexts for developing these skills. Students should be given practice in developing thesis statements, topic sentences and supporting details within the framework of a specific topic. They should be encouraged to experiment with different organizing principles and writing strategies in order to discover which is most consistent with their purpose. This will sharpen their critical skills and alert them to the range of options at their disposal.

An extensive exposure to various types of reading material is also indicated. The styles of different writers will further display the variety of options which are available in terms of word choice, sentence forms etc. Constant exposure to the desired Standard English patterns will, hopefully, develop the kind of automatic pilot the student needs for monitoring

grammaticality and appropriateness. Analysis of samples from the work of established writers will give students an opportunity to develop critical and metalinguistic skills. I here hasten to explain that this is not meant to be a dry mechanical form of analysis. Students should be encouraged to examine the purpose being accomplished, the particular words, phrases and techniques which are used and how these have contributed to the overall purpose. Hopefully, they will come to understand that writing exists apart from the author after it is produced and that it can be examined and evaluated in terms of its effect on the reader and the extent to which it has achieved its purpose.

Finally practice is most important. In Jamaican Freshman English classes (even moreso than in America) the greater portion of the allotted time should be given over to writing. The classroom should be a workshop. Writing,revision, editing and conferencing sessions should be a regular feature of the programme. These suggestions might be "run of the mill" in the American system but in the Jamaican setting they are not. It is relevant to consider the question: How greatly is the lack of writing practice responsible for the weaknesses evident in the essays of Jamaican students?" A few comments on certain elements of teaching practice at the high school and college levels will clarify the issue. The streaming of students into Arts and Science forms in the fourth year of high school excludes the science students from extended reading in different genres, and writing in a variety of styles for different purposes. At the college level, it is mainly these students who experience the greater problems in Freshman English.

The fact that the University of the West Ihdies offers only one compulsory, non credit Use of English course at the Undergraduate level

further aggravates the situation. There is an attempt to cram too many components into one course -- basic linguistic concepts, research skills, elementary principles of logic, the use of statistics in communication, the elements of style and the use of emotive persuasion in advertising and political propaganda. All of this is attempted in one year of twenty-two teaching weeks. This leads to a highly structured, content-oriented approach to teaching and testing. As at the secondary level, not enough time is spent on actual writing and the provision of useful feedback to the student.

In recent times, there has been an effort to introduce a reading and writing skills unit into the existing course, featuring college survival skills such as reading, listening and notetaking skills; essay, report and resume writing. But the need for at least one other course especially devoted to writing is strongly indicated as the problem of adequate time precludes successful teaching. The situation is analogous to carrying out cosmetic surgery where major, lifesaving, corrective surgery is necessary.

In conclusion, I have outlined the nature of literacy as it is (or should be), manifested at the college level. We have looked at a profile of Jamaican creole-speaking Freshman English students to determine how they measure up to the expected standards of literacy at their level. We have identified the major problems which characterize their work and attempted to trace them to possible origins or causes. Finally, suggestions have been advanced for modifying teaching content and methodology in accordance with the needs of students. A wise philosopher whose name I have long forgotten once said that "Knowledge is power." I sincerely hope that the knowledge of the nature of writing problems within the creole-

setting will lead to the development of effective strategies which will, in time, bring about positive change.

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HANDOUT NO. 2

AN ASSORTMENT OF MISCUES OF CREOLE-SPEAKING COLLEGE STUDENTS

1. Being as they are only approached from one direction they can fight off the enemy.
2. Various activities were carrying on around the shore.
3. If a person mind are not free from the devil no matter what land they go to, they will still in captivity.
4. The word political was use toward the movement.
5. The Rastafarian has try to patternized this principle but has misinterpret the scripture.
6. Samson locks were cut off.
7. He would take the holy communion that serve by the priest.
8. The Archbishop who response for the diocese explain that he adhered to the christian faith.
9. He was somewhat influence by his friend.
10. There was too much facts and too little time.
11. There were problems with how they conduct the lectures.
12. He saw a next man pass by.
13. They expect we the students to grasp it.
14. This was due to they asking questions.
15. I get the idea of they wanting to use us as guinea pigs.

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND USE OF ENGLISH

HANDOUT NO. 142 — USE OF ENGLISH — COURSE CONTENT

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

LANGUAGE IN USE IN THE CARIBBEAN

JAMAICAN CREOLE GRAMMAR

a. Plurals..... Most often, Standard English makes a noun plural by adding 's' to the end of the word: 'BOOT' -- 'BOOTS'. Creole makes nouns plural by adding the particle '-dem' to the singular' 'BOOT' -- 'BOOT-DEM'. Otherwise a preceding word indicates plurality; 'NUFF man', 'six dog'. In J.C. a final 's' does not indicate plurality - Jamaicans speak of 'A shoes', 'a pants', etc.

b. Subject & Verb... 'Me walk/you walk/ im walk/ we walk/unoo walk/dem walk is correct Creole. The verb does not change, whatever the subject is. In Standard English a third person subject (he/she/it or a noun) would cause a change in the verb" 'he/she/it walks'.

c. Tense..... In Jamaican Creole there are few changes of tense. The verbs do not indicate time. We usually have to deduce the time from the context, or from a time word: 'Me see im', 'Me taste it already'. In J.C. the past is often indicated by putting 'en', 'ben', or 'did' in front of the verb: 'Me en go a town', 'im did seh so'. But the more complex tenses of Standard Ekglish - 'I walked/I have walked/ I had walked/walking/having walked etc.' have no counter parts in Jamaican Creole.

d. Personal Pronouns..There are six personal pronouns in J.C.; in Standard English there are eleven. Jamaican Creole makes no distinction between male and female' 'im' can mean either 'he' or 'she'. There is also no distinction made between subject and object; 'me' can mean 'I' or 'me'; 'dem' can mean 'they' or 'them'. We have to deduce the sex of the person from the context of the sentence: similarly we have to deduce who is doing the action and who is having it done to him. Standard English has pronouns whose job it is to show possession ' 'my', 'his' etc. In Creole the personal pronouns are used to show possession; 'im tek up im book', 'a fi me sister'.

e. Inversion..... One sentence type which is basic to Jamaican Creole but which is not common in Standard English, is the inverted sentence type. It is usually used for emphasis:

We a talk 'bout Mary. → A Mary we a talk 'bout.

Me a go deh now. → a deh me a go now.
OR a now me a go deh.

Dat a dog → A dog dat.

.../2

f. Passive..... There is no distinct passive form in Jamaican Creole - it is the context that tells us whether active or passive is meant:

De man can drink/ De water can drink./ De food buy.

g. Auxiliary Verbs.. Verbs which accompany and assist main verbs are called auxiliary verbs. For example, 'I am going', 'She was sleeping'. Three Creole auxiliary verbs, which do the work of S.E. Parts of the verb 'to be', are of African origin. They are 'deh', 'dah', and 'a':

Dem deh 'bout de place. Me a go town.

Mary dah come.

.....

N.B. The above is only a rough sketch or outline of Jamaican Creole Grammar. Much has been left out. However, the main features of the language - particularly those which differ from Standard English - have been described. For more details read, F.G. Cassidy, Jamaica Talk, especially Chapter 4.

NOTES: